On James Schuyler: A Reconsideration

Some poets' reputations decline after their deaths while others' slowly rise. James Schuyler, a case in point, belongs to the latter group. During his lifetime (1923-1991), he was never a very public poet – he only gave regular readings during his last few years – and, since his death, he's been generally overshadowed by his more famous friends in the "New York School": John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch. Lately, however, there's been something of a renaissance of interest in Schuyler.

His selected letters, *Just the Thing*, were published in 2004 by Turtle Point Press. His two overlooked novels, *Alfred and Guinevere* and *What's for Dinner?*, were recently reprinted by New York Review Books Classics. Essays on him have appeared in *Poetry* and other publications. And most recently, his letters to Frank O'Hara have been published. Along with his *Collected Poems*, his *Diary*, his *Selected Art Writings*, and *A Nest of Ninnies*, a novel co-written with Ashbery, this amounts to a fairly substantial library for a poet with whom many well-read people are unfamiliar.

With this flurry of recent publications, it now seems an appropriate time to reconsider Schuyler's achievement. Dive in anywhere and there are pleasures to find. His two novels, as the imprimatur of NYRB promises, are minor classics. The letters, which are currently getting the most attention, can be read with pleasure by anyone, even those unfamiliar with Schuyler's poems. They are chatty, often full of campy wit – especially those addressed to Ashbery – and also keenly observant of everyday details in a manner reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop's letters.

Though nominally a member of the New York School, Schulyer's poetry is unlike anything written by its other members. In fact, the case can be made that the NY School poets are all quite different and not a "school" at all, but merely a group of friends writing in the same general place and time. Still, among the school's other members, including the also often overlooked Barbara Guest, a degree of stylistic virtuosity, wit, and experimentation is central to their work while, with Schuyler, plainspokenness and an almost artless approach to form is central.

Schuyler found his *métier* more slowly than his friends did. *Freely Espousing*, his first full-length book of poems, is most similar to other NY School poets in terms of its experimentation and variety of form; but it lacks the verve of O'Hara and the depth of perception of Ashbery. While Ashbery became the king of their hill seemingly overnight, and while O'Hara always sparkled as ringleader of their poetry scene – then glowed as a legend after his untimely death – Schuyler, without any fanfare, slowly came into his own "voice" (or, more properly, "voices"), composing meticulously observed poems that bear fidelity to the observed world.

His approach showed itself in hundreds of – what he referred to as – "skinny" poems, each rarely more than a few beats per line, whose collective subject matters often read like diary entries or letters. Indeed, the line between letters, diary, and "skinny" poems is thin (pun indented). Reading some of the "skinny" poems in isolation, one may consider the poems to be slight and dismiss Schuyler's talent. But the best way to read these poems is through immersion, to pick up the *Collected Poems* and read them straight through. There are a number of now familiar anthology pieces among them, most notably "Korean Mums."

This is a poem well worth reading and rereading. It appears so simple at first, so plainly written, that it's easy to miss the complex movement of the poem: It begins in observation of a garden and, just when the reader is ready to be lulled into a beautiful pastoral scene, the poem suddenly breaks, or is broken into by an alien presence:

> This morning
> one of the dogs killed
> a barn owl.

This intrusion sets the poet's mind onto darker paths. He remembers seeing the owl flying the day before, and the effect of the owl returning into the poem after its death is eerie, almost ghostly. Soon, the little Eden of the garden at the beginning of the poem turns into a little Wasteland:

> There is a
> dull book with me,
> an apple core, cigarettes,
> an ashtray.

What has entered the poem is death – or, at least, the awareness of death. The poet now realizes that everything will die and decay. In the poem, the "world" is primarily the accumulation of the poet's perceptions. And so, how he reflects on the transience of all things

is to note the transience of his own perceptions – everything dies because everything dies to the poet; he will forget everything.

I'll
soon forget it: what
is there I have not forgot?
Or one day will forget:
this garden, the breeze
in stillness, even
the words, Korean mums.

It is a quiet but stunning ending as the earlier scenes of the poem are erased; finally, even the title of the poem, "Korean Mums," is erased.

Though there are many delights in the skinny poems, it is the long, rambling poems that are his masterpieces, particularly "The Morning of the Poem." A meditation on what is lost – time past, lost loves, death of loved ones and of parts of the self – the poem moves through and out of chaos and disorder into a kind of understanding grounded in compassion, achieving resolution in the process of meditation. The process in which this kind of poem engages requires a back-and-forth movement, repetition and qualification, circling back on itself to deepen the poet's and the reader's understanding, to deepen the meditation.

For example, early on in "The Morning of the Poem," Schuyler shows his mind at work, reflecting on the symbol of Baudelaire's skull, as both a *memento mori* and a reminder of the role of the artist: "Why did Baudelaire wander in? Don't I love Heine more? Or / Walt Whitman, Walt? No, they come to my death bed and one by one take my hand / And say, 'So long, old man'." He wonders about Baudelaire, which introduces other poets into his consciousness, which leads in turn to thoughts of mortality central to the poem. His mind keeps moving and shifting tones, moving from the speaker's deathbed to the sexual bed of Wallace Simpson as imagined in circus imagery, the tone shifting once again, this time to low comedy.

Perhaps the deepest truth this meditative process reveals is that we come to know ourselves by reflecting on who we have been, by re-imagining the experiences that formed us. In this way, the poem is a psyche-building enterprise. Schuyler lets in multiple facets of his persona, from the tragic sense of everyone's mortality, including his own, to aesthetic appreciation of things as they are, to comic lightheartedness at his and others' follies. That multiplicity of tone and image creates a full poetic persona.

Near the beginning of "The Morning of the Poem," Schuyler defines the artist's role as the "determination to be strong / To see things as they are too fierce and yet not too much," implying an ethical element to viewing the world as it is, a responsibility to

truthfulness, as well as a psychological element. After all, seeing clearly and honestly requires "determination to be strong." Given Schuyler's recurrent and serious bouts with mental illness, this determination is poignant, resulting in poems with a fidelity to the observed world rarely seen in poems this stunning since the best works of Bishop.

Schuyler's poetics rely on an allegiance to plainspokenness rather than overwrought diction, plus a preference for direct statement over flights of the imagination. These sentiments are also echoed throughout Schuyler's letters, in which he bemoans Auden's (for whom he was once a private secretary) reliance on the *Oxford English Dictionary* for inspiration. Schuyler's belief that a poem is made up of words, not of ideas or feelings, parallels his adherence to images grounded in the world as it is perceived, rather than as it is imagined.

Schuyler's entire poetics is "figurative" (much like his close friend Fairfield Porter's paintings), one that has the effect of praising the world by refusing to pretty it up or to make it worse than it is. Even the poet's personal psychological issues are, when mentioned, treated directly while not overstated. By reliving scenes of his past and making them into poems built of common speech, Schuyler constructs poems of deep feeling and insight, ones that create a self by meditating on the poet's past experiences.

The reader who goes on this journey with a poet is connected to the poet in a vicarious act that strengthens, as well, the reader's sense of self. With the renewed interest in Schuyler, one hopes that many new readers will embark on this journey and discover for themselves one of America's great poetic masters: James Schuyler.